The Diamond Sutra

Dharma Talk of December 7, 1997

(Translated from Vietnamese into English by Sister True Emptiness)

Dear Sangha, Today is the 7 December 1977 we are in the Upper Hamlet in the Winter Retreat. Today before I continue in Vietnamese, I will summarise in English what we have learned in the last few talks.

The Diamond Sutra is made with a conversation between the Buddha and one of his disciples, Subhuti. Subhuti is known as someone who practises very well looking deeply into the nature of emptiness of everything that is. And, in the beginning, Subhuti asks the Buddha a question. His question is very practical. He wants to know how to master our mind, how to control our mind, how to take care of our mind in order for us to be able to pursue the path of practice. His question has three elements. The first element is he noticed that the Buddha is always willing to support the bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are those who have a great aspiration to help others. That is why Subhuti recognised the fact that the Buddha always supports and gives energy to bodhisattvas who have a great deal of energy within them, because their desire, their deepest desire, is to serve and to help all living beings. And this is not discrimination on the part of the Buddha, but it is the willingness to invest in those who want to live for the sake of others.

The second element is that those bodhisattvas motivated by that desire to help other people, how can they cultivate their minds? How can they take care of their minds? What can they rely on in order to master their own minds? And this is a very practical question, because sometimes we don't know how to care for our minds, and we let our minds wander in the direction of suffering and delusion and uncertainty. That is why we can say that this question of Subhuti is very practical. I think there are only two elements in the question.

And the answer given by the Buddha to Subhuti is also very precise, and it has three elements. He said that bodhisattvas are those who should make a vow to bring all living beings from the shore of suffering to the shore of well being and liberation. But while doing the work of bringing living beings to the other shore, the bodhisattvas should not be caught in the idea of self. The bodhisattva should not see the distinction between the saviour and the living beings that are saved. And the question he asks is a kind of answer in that way, he said that if a bodhisattva still has the notion of self, of human being, of living being, and of life span, this is not exactly a bodhisattva yet. That is his answer.

And I have spent a lot of time explaining about these four concepts, these four ideas. The first idea is the idea of self. The second idea is the idea of man. The third idea is the idea of living beings, and the fourth idea is the idea of life span. And this is the summary of what I said in Vietnamese.

Self is the notion that there is a separate self that can exist independently from non-self elements. So the Buddha advises us to look into the self in order to see that the self is only made of non-self elements. And when you know, when you have seen that the self is made of non-self elements, you begin to see the real self. Otherwise you only have an idea, a wrong idea, about self, and that is why I talk about the principle of identity which is A is A, A is not B. That is the principle of identity that we are used to following in our thinking. And that thinking does not lead us very far, and that is why the Buddha gives us a method of looking, of thinking, that can help us to see more deeply into the nature of things. So suppose A is self, and if you look into the self you see that the self is made only of non-self elements. So instead of saying A is A, he said A is B,C, D, E, etc., because the self is made of only non-self elements. And when you are able to see that A is B, C, D, E, etc., it means not A, and then you can begin to see the real A. So the dialectics of the Diamond Sutra is A is not A, that is why it is a truly? This is the dialectics of the Diamond Sutra.

When you look into A, you have to see that A is entirely made of non-A elements, and if you are able to see that, now you can see the true nature of A. This is quite different from the way we are used to thinking and to behave. The same thing is true with the other four ideas. The idea of humans. Humans are a race, are a species among millions of species on earth, and if we look into the human, a man or a woman, we see that a man is made of non-man elements. If there are no animals, no vegetables, no minerals, man cannot be made at all. So man is made of non-man elements. This is an ecological insight. We can say that in order to protect man, we have to protect non-man elements. This is why can say that the Diamond Sutra is a most ancient text teaching us how to preserve our ecosystem in order for us to be able to preserve ourselves.

So humans are made of only non-human elements, and when you have seen that you begin to see the true nature of the human. Human are not human. Humans are made of non-human elements. That is why humans are really humans. The same thing is true with living beings. Living beings are believed to have sensations, perceptions, and so on, suffering and happiness; but if we look into the nature of living beings, we will see the same. We see that living beings are made of non-living -being elements like the minerals, the vegetables; and if you can see that, you begin to understand what is really a living being. In fact, science shows us that the frontier separating living beings and non-living beings is very vague. We cannot draw a sharp line between the two. There are beings that we cannot say are a vegetable or an animal. So a living being, if you can see it, is made of non-living being elements. Then you begin to see the true nature of living-beings.

The last idea is about life span. Usually we think that we are born at a certain time, we will exist for some time, and we will die. Birth and death. And this is a notion that does not correspond to the truth. In fact, the Buddha said that when conditions are sufficient, the body manifests itself, and you can see that as being; and when one of the conditions is lacking and you can no longer see the body and you say that there is no living-being. In fact, it is not true that you only begin to exist from here and you will stop existing at this point. In fact, the notion of life span is the ground for many other notions, like the notion of birth and death, the notion of being and non-being, the notion of coming and going, the notion of same or different, and so on. So the notion of life span has to be removed in order for us to see that reality is free from all notions, including the notion of birth and death, being and non-being, coming and going, and so on. So if you look deeply into the life span, you discover that this is only a manifestation, and if you get caught in your perception, the form, then you miss the whole thing. You cannot see reality as it is: reality which is free from birth and death, being and non-being, coming and going, same and different, and so on. So when you look at life span, and you see that your life span is not limited in the spirit of time, you begin to understand what is a life span.

So this formula is very good, very necessary, for you to understand the Diamond Sutra, because this formula was repeated several times in the Diamond Sutra. For example, a stupid person is not a stupid person that is why the Tathagata calls him a stupid person. A bodhisattva knows that he is not a bodhisattva, that is why he is called a bodhisattva. So that kind of language is very strange, but if you know the formula, you understand the Diamond Sutra quite easily.

Dear Subhuti, the bodhisattva tries to help, but does not lean on the form, on the sound, on the taste in order to help. It means that the bodhisattva tries to help without relying on form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or object of mind to practise generosity. The Diamond Sutra is the sutra that teaches us the six paramitas in a very concrete and deep way. You know that among the six paramitas the paramita on great understanding is the best. And we learn that the Buddha used to illustrate the great understanding paramita as being like a pot which contained water. It must be a deep, well-baked container, because if the

container is not well baked, it will have a lot of leaks and all our water will be gone. So if we don't have great understanding, all the other actions will be of no value or will not bring any success, because if the great understanding is not enough, if in our understanding there are many leaks - that means many short comings, many confusions - the other paramitas cannot be followed.

So the great understanding in the Diamond Sutra is that there is no distinction between us and other living beings. We feel that we are one body with everyone we help, but we don't have the impression of helping, like the right hand helping the left hand or like the hand helping the legs will not say, "I am helping you". So the great understanding is that we are one, that the other species are integral with ourselves. We are not different from other species who are part of our body. When we understand deeply like that, there is no distinction, and the help will be perfect, and the practise of generosity will not say it is the practise of generosity. It is like we are breathing, we are eating; we share, we practise generosity without knowing that we are practising generosity. We will not rely on form, sound, smell, taste, touch, object of mind; these things are the world. Because with our eyes we can see the form, with our ears we can hear sound, with our noses we can smell. Taste, touch and objects of our minds are only things we perceive, so all these six realms make the world.

Our concept, perception about things in our mind is an image, an idea we have about these things. The word dharma here means objects of mind, everything you perceive in your mind. Sometimes we perceive reality wrongly. But a wrong perception is still a dharma. So the table is a dharma, the flower is a dharma, the friend next to you is a dharma, and the sun is a dharma. But all of them are objects of your perception. It doesn't mean that you can catch their true reality. You have a perception about these things. So when you practice generosity, don't be caught by your perceptions and concepts; don't be caught by form, sound, form, smell, taste, touch, and object of mind. Just behave naturally, beautifully, like you brush your teeth, like you eat your breakfast, like you drink a cup of tea.

When we share something we don't think we own something that I am giving to you and you must thank me. Again, it's like the right hand helping the left hand. The right hand will not say: "I am helping you my left hand, you have to be thankful to me." The great understanding in the Diamond Sutra is to see we are one with everything. Don't think the other is the receiver. Don't think: "I am practising generosity. I am a great person. I am a generous person. I am giving to you. The right hand never says that to the left hand. The right hand can help your hurt feet but will not tell the feet: "I am helping you." And when the right hand helps the body to do something it will not discriminate and say to the left hand: "I am very talented because I can write poetry and calligraphy, I can cook and paint, and you, you have no value." The right hand knows that there is the presence of the left hand. The right hand knows form, sound, taste, etc. but the right hand is not ignorant and does not discriminate and say: "I am very important." The teaching of the Diamond Sutra is you must learn to see that you are that great body of life. If the other person is you then the person that hurt you is also you, the person who helps you is also you. When you help others you do everything like you do for yourself, like you breathe, like you eat.

There are those who are delinquent, caught by drugs, in prison. We can see these people in the light of the teachings of the Diamond Sutra. You see that they are you. Have you done something to help your left hand? Have you done something to help your toes? Because they are you. If you say: "Oh, we have to have the death penalty, we have to kill them all, they don't try to study or to live spiritually, they must behave like me." When you speak in that way, then according to the Diamond Sutra you are behaving as if you were the right hand saying to the left hand: "You have no value, you must write calligraphy like me, write poetry like me, you have to cook like me, you have to paint like me." That is our behaviour if we say we have to have the death penalty

The teaching of the Diamond Sutra is so deep. It can help you to see that such people are made of non-delinquent elements. Perhaps they don't have a father, or he is an alcoholic who ignores them. They have a mother who doesn't know how to take care of them. They live in an environment where everybody hates everyone else, where everyone is self-centred, competitive, violent, and unkind. If we were born in such a situation, and our father ignores us, our mother doesn't give us anything to eat, then we would be exactly like them. So, when we see clearly like that we will see we are them and they are us. In that case the right hand can do something to help the toes, the fingers, the ears, every part of the body, the hands have to do their best. So you can see that everybody is yourself. And when you look deeply like that you see your responsibility for those who suffer. And you have to take care of all of them. We never pay any attention to them, we never spare one cent for them or one minute for them. We are somehow co-responsible for the birth of the many delinquent people, of the many who use drugs, and we don't do anything to help them. We are responsible, don't blame them. When you look at A, you see that A is not A. A is made from elements other than A, the non-A elements. So you can see that delinquent person is not a delinquent person, but is all the elements which create that person. And then your heart is full of love, and you know what to do in order to create more conditions of love, understanding and care for those who are in need.

Another example is the way we see ourselves. When we look at ourselves, our own body and mind, there are many things we don't like, many behaviours we are not satisfied with. In each of us there is a judge and there is the person who is being judged. There are many of us who disagree with ourselves, who cannot accept ourselves, who feel we are so bad, we have so many shortcomings. We are so judgmental toward ourselves. We have so many weaknesses, and we don't want them. We want to transcend them, we want to transform them, but we can't. And so we start to despise ourselves. If you can't accept yourself, how can you accept others? So you have to learn to accept yourself first. The Buddha said that you will learn to look at yourself deeply. You are made of many elements that are not you. So, you look deeply into yourself to see the many elements that brought you into being. There are many genetic elements you have received from your parents, grandparents. There is your society, your traditions, the nation around you, the people around you, the economic situation, educational conditions and so on. So when you see all these things you see many elements which are not A in A, that is many elements which are not you in you. And so you feel less judgmental. You will not say: "Oh, I am so bad because..." We have inherited a lot. For example we might see: "My grandfather was also very weak in that way, he could not control himself", or "My mother was like that too" and so on. So you see many elements which are not you but which are in you. You say: "My father is exactly like that. My mother, my grandmother was like that. A lot of people around me influenced me, like my close friends." So you accept yourself as you are, and if you have a wish to transform yourself you have to cut all these roots. You have to say "Hello" to these elements and say: "Daddy, I don't want to continue like you." We end the circle of suffering now. But you smile to your shortcomings, you smile to that habit energy. You smile to the non-A elements. In the past you always blamed A. A is yourself, a separate self, full of shortcomings, full of everything for which you judge yourself. You can see all these elements you received from this friend so you can decide to keep away from that friend. I received these elements from my Mum. So I say hello to my Mum, but I say: "I don't want to be like you Mum. I received elements from my grandmother, I say: "Hello grandma, I don't want to continue these elements in you." So you smile, and you gently transform.

The first thing to do is to look deeply at A, A is yourself. And you see what power A has in A, that is how much power or control you can have over yourself. Instead of looking at A like the person that you hate, learn to look at A like the person that you love. For example, maybe you love me. But I am not me. I have all the good conditions which create me: the patriarchs, the Buddha; I am not so important as you thought. I received a lot from a lot of great people. And so these great people are transferring their wisdom to you. So that is A. A could be me, A could be the person you love, the person you hate, could be yourself. You look at A but you try to see the non-A elements in A so that you learn to appreciate all, and see in a broader way and not focus only on A.

Another example is when we join your palms and pay respect to a spiritual teacher in order to express our admiration and gratitude. We came to that teacher. He has a form. If he is someone who has deep understanding he can help us to go in a good direction, a better direction. And you bow deeply to him, you bow deeply to his form. You put all your trust and confidence in him. We invest 100% in the teacher. Three or four years later you discover that he was not like you thought. You had a wrong image of him. His reality is quite different. You have invested in a form, an image which is not the reality of that person. And then you leave him, and you suffer. How can we behave so that such things do not happen either to a teacher, or to a person you fall in love with? Also in that situation you invest three or four years in her or in him. Then after that time you discover that her or his

reality is so different, and you are shocked. And then you leave him or her and you are so desperate.

My advice is that of the Diamond Sutra. You look at that form, and you know that you have a perception about that form. In your head is just an image of that person but not the reality. And that image is made of that form. But that spiritual teacher is made of so many elements which are not him. You did not see clearly. When you first came to him you saw a number of qualities and you said: "You have these qualities, I am so happy." And you hoped that you could develop these qualities in yourself. Then later you see a number of shortcomings in him and you come and tell him. But maybe it’s not a shortcoming, maybe your look is not deep enough and you have misunderstood. So with a big smile, with the great love that you have, you come to that person and tell him or her: "That is the shortcoming that I don’t like in you very much. Maybe there is some reason behind it." When they can tell you yes, there is something behind, then you are able to see that it’s not a shortcoming but maybe something more profound, something you may appreciate. Or if it’s a real shortcoming you can discuss it in peace, in joy, in gentleness, and he can transform his shortcoming.

It’s the same for us. We come to see a teacher but we do it in a very superficial way. We want him to appreciate us, to consider us as a great person. But if he is very busy and has many students and does not pay enough attention to you, then you feel hurt. You feel that because you appreciate him he must appreciate you. And you feel hurt, because it seems to you that other students are less good than you are and they are paid a lot of attention by the teacher. And you try your best but he doesn’t pay attention to you, he doesn’t even look at you. And then you suffer. That is because you rely on the form.

Sometimes I sit and give a lecture for many thousand people. More than one thousand people might kneel down in order to take the five wonderful mindfulness trainings. In the United States on the last trip more than 600 persons on one occasion knelt down in front of me and received the five wonderful trainings. And they pay deep respect like they pay respect to the Buddha. But I look deeply into this and I see that although these people pay respect to me, to this form, it’s not really my form. This form is made from the wisdom, insights, and beautiful qualities of the Buddha, of the patriarchs, of my teacher. My teacher, the Buddha and the other bodhisattvas are borrowing my form for those people to pay respect. So they pay respect to the qualities of all these people. It does not affect me. I don't feel that I am very important. I don't feel that I am so great. I just let all these patriarchs borrow my form. Even if 600 persons or 600,000 persons pay respect to me it will not affect me. Because I know I am not me. I am very aware that A is not A, that is why A is real A. I am not me. I am somehow representing many spiritual traditions and many teachers who helped me and who borrow my form. They are paying respect to all these streams of wisdom that I received and that I just reflect and transmit to them.

When a young monk has just received his robe and has practised just a few months, lay people may come and pay respect to her or him. And they panic and say: "I have practised only a few months, I have no value, please don't pay respect to me." Don’t say this. You have to be aware that they pay respect to the form of the Buddha in you, the form of many patriarchs in you, and they just borrow that form to pay respect. When people pay respect like that they can be in touch with a lot of sources of wisdom. But you have nothing to do with that. You are just letting your teacher borrow your form. And you feel that you are paying respect to these teachers at the same time. When they bow to the form, the robe of your teacher, you are paying respect to the teacher in that robe too. And you are living according to the teaching of the Diamond Sutra. When you pay respect to a person you have learned to see in this way. You have to see that you are paying respect to all these steams of wisdom, and you just borrow that form. And you know that although your teacher has many shortcomings he is still wearing the robe of many streams of teachers, of patriarchs, of those who are full of wisdom. And so you feel that you are not in touch with him, but you are in touch with many streams of insight by means of him, and we have a lot of respect.

I know of a Vietnamese lady who every time she sees a monk or nun she touches the earth three times, prostrates three times, with no discrimination. One day a lay person said to her: "You just paid respect to a monk, do you know who he is?" She answered, "Yes." "Do you know that he violates a lot of precepts, eats meat, secretly drinks alcohol, do you know that?" She said: "I know. But that is not my business. He stills wears the monk’s robe. I try to touch the deep insight of many streams of ancestors behind him. I pay respect to this. I am not affected by his behaviour." She is practising with the wisdom of the Diamond Sutra, she is not relying on form.

Even if you are a monk or nun who has received full ordination, if your behaviour is based in your being caught by form then you cannot advance. Sometimes you are a high monk, but you still behave like someone caught by form. If you are already a monk or a practitioner in the practice centre for a rather long time, and if everyday your wisdom is deeper, if everyday you are more peaceful in yourself and with the people around you and you can accept the most difficult people who may be around you, then you know what you want and you don’t need to invest in one person, one teacher. So you have to look deeply: are you growing every day? Are you happier every day? Are you more in harmony with yourself and with the others around you every day, the unlovable people as well as the loveable people? So it doesn't effect you if your teacher does or doesn't keep the precepts, it doesn’t effect you what other people say or do. You only take care of yourself. You try your best to really help people. Sometimes when you see someone's shortcomings you are not skilful enough and you shock people by scolding and behaving in a way that creates wars around you. You look deeply and you see the shortcomings of everyone, and you try your best in a skilful and loving way to transform these shortcomings, in the way that you would do it for yourself.

When your left hand is caught and wounded you do not say "Stupid hand, you have to change." You show care so that your left hand can be healed. So you try to help other people in the sangha who are not very well, who are easily hurt and have a lot of difficulties. You will not come to these members of the sangha and say: "You do not behave very well, you have to change." So we learn to care for the people who are weak in the sangha, like you are caring for your left hand, for the wound on your leg. You care without any idea of caring, you do it in a natural way, like you care for yourself.

Wherever there is form there is some deception, some deceptive way of seeing. And you can be caught by form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and object of mind. All the images we have in our mind can be very deceptive. We have to be very humble about them. Learn to look more deeply to see all the sides of reality and to understand better. If you see that the other side of the reality of that person is not so beautiful as you wish, then with care and love you still can help that person to transform, you can help in such a way that everything will be peaceful and harmonious for yourself and the people around you.

When Bodhidharma met with King in China the king told Bodhidharma: "I have built many Buddhist temples, do you think I have a lot of merit? The King expects Bodhidharma to say: "Oh, you have a lot of merit." But Bodhidharma said: "No, no merit at all." This is a very good answer. It can shock the King. And if he is shocked then he has a chance to learn the wisdom of the Diamond Sutra. But if not then he will be very proud of himself and be caught by form.

Sometimes people are taking a nap or enjoying themselves while we are cleaning pots or working the garden. There are many ways to work for the Sangha. If you say, "Oh, this is a good occasion for me to serve the sangha, even though others are sleeping and enjoying themselves", then your merit will be great. If you say: "I am the only one who works hard while others are enjoying themselves or taking a long nap, there are so many lazy members of the Sangha who don’t do anything", then your merit is very small, it’s nothing, like Bodhidharma told the King.

"Subhuti, do you think that the space in the eastern quarter can be measured?" "No, World Honoured One." Subhuti, can space in the western, southern and northern quarters, above and below be measured?" "No, World Honoured One." "Subhuti, if a bodhisattva does not rely on any concept when practising generosity, then the happiness that results from that virtuous act is as great as space." It means when you practise generosity you do it without keeping track, you do it for your joy, you do it like you do it for yourself. Like when you are thirsty you drink, when you are hungry you eat. So the work you are doing you do in a very natural, loving way, like you care for your own body.

"What do you think Subhuti? Is it possible to grasp the Tathagata by means of bodily signs?" "No, World Honoured One, when

the Tathagata speaks of bodily signs there are no signs being talked about." You have to see the Tathagata without signs. If you try to find the Buddha with certain physical characteristics you are deceived. The Buddha can hide himself in other forms, so don't be tricked by the sign.

The Buddha said to Subhuti "In a place where there is something that can be distinguished by signs, in that place there is deception. If you can see the sign-less nature of signs then you can see the Tathagata."(5) Please learn this sentence by heart, it is the core of the teaching of the Diamond Sutra. Beauty can be seen in the autumn leaves, in the spring blossom, but also in the fallen leaf. If you can see the sign-less nature of signs then you can see the Tathagata. If you can see the non-A elements in A then you can see A deeply. Don't see A superficially. Learn to see many different elements which are not A in order to see A deeply. If you are still angry, sad, suffering, jealous that is because you are caught by form. The sign could be you. The sign could be the other person. You see that you are A in a very superficial way, you don't see the many elements behind you, which make you. You see the other person exactly the same way, as A, superficially, you don't see the many elements which are not A. You only see A. You think you understand yourself but you don't know who you are.

Western philosophy also says: "Know yourself." This means you don't know who you are, you have to look more deeply and see yourself more deeply. That truth is not only inside of the Buddha. There are many other people around the planet who have the same insights. We have learn to see the non-A elements in A. When you are able to see the non-A elements in the other person then your anger, sadness, suffering, jealously will be gone. When you are angry with someone you have to see the many elements that are not him or her. When you see in this way, when you see many elements which are not him but are now in him, then you see him in a deeper way, a broader way and you can accept A more easily.

When you see yourself with all your difficulties and self judgement, if you can see the non-you elements coming from many people who are not you, such as your grandfather, your grandmother, your father, then you see that much of your severity and other attitudes come from other roots, other elements which are not you. And then you see: "Ah, that is my grandpa who is judging my friend." And then when you see in that friend all the many elements which are not him or not her, then you can see this is why they behave in such a way. The other person could be your son, daughter, father, mother, or your partner. You have to learn to see the other person like a mirror. If he behaves like this, it's because you behave like that. You have to see how much responsibility you have for the manifestation of that behaviour and how much responsibility the other person has. So, when you look into yourself and into the other person you see other elements in that person and in yourself, and then you start to find a way to undo the difficulties and to make peace.

The other day I met with a number of candidates who want to become monks and nuns. There is one who is only 14 years old and another who is 16. I said something like this: "If you don't have a very great desire to become a monk or nun you should not try to become a monk or nun. You must want to become a monk more than 100% in order to decide." Because becoming a monk or nun is very important. We make the vow to give rise to a lot of energy in order to transform our shortcomings and those of the people around us: father, sister, brother in our own family, as well as the people we live with. So, we don't become a monk in order to find an enjoyable situation in which to take refuge. Becoming a monk means to invest all your life in a career. This career is well traced by the Buddha 2,600 years ago. He not only tried to transform all his own shortcomings, but he vowed to transform all the short comings of his blood family, his spiritual family, and all the society around him, all of society that could be in touch with him. So, it's a big career.

When you decide to become a monk the simplicity of your living conditions will not effect you. Maybe the place where you live has no heating system, or there is not enough food to eat. You don't live in too ascetic a way, but you try to live in the most simple way, in order to be able to spend your time and invest your life in the ways of transforming yourself and transforming other people around you, and to invest in the enterprise of those who vow to serve the world. That great energy to transform yourself and to transform the world we call bodhicitta, the mind of love, the mind of awakening. If Plum Village feels too poor, the life too simple, not comfortable enough, if you are not very happy and you think you cannot live like that, then you know you are not prepared to become a monk or nun. Becoming a monk or nun is not like going to university, because after university you leave and make your own career. Your teachers and friends at the university are just temporary. But to become a monk you have to consider your teacher and the members of the Sangha as your companions not only for this life, but also for many more lives, and you will not quit the sangha. Because one drop of water will not arrive at the ocean. One drop of water will evaporate along the way. But if the drop of water joins the river then the whole river will go to the ocean. Alone, you cannot go anywhere. But if you join the Sangha of practice, the sangha of the career of Gautama Buddha then you can go anywhere, you can transform a mountain, an ocean, you can do many things.

When you go out from Plum Village sometimes people admire you, and you have the idea that you can leave and become a very important spiritual teacher for the people. But you may not remember that one drop of water cannot arrive at the ocean. Without the sangha we can be caught by the desire for fame. People praise us a lot and we forget that we are an A made up of a lot of non-A elements. You need to remember that you are made up of many non-A elements. You could be caught by laziness and forget to practice, you can get caught by your own negative habit energy. But living in the sangha people will reflect your negative energy back to you. They will say: "That is your negative habit energy, please transform it." And in this way you cannot keep it forever. They remind you once, twice, three times, and then you have to try to transform. But when you live alone nobody will remind you and your negative energy can grow stronger, and slowly we become a monster without knowing it. I wrote the short story The Pine Gate in order to say just this; that if you do not practice mindfulness one day a holy person can become a monster. The only way to help ourselves is to live with the sangha so the sangha will shine their awareness on our negative energy and help us transform it, and will help us to keep and strengthen our positive energy.

We have to take refuge in the 3-jewels. "I take refuge in the Sangha" because in the sangha can shine their awareness on my negative energy. Alone we can be so sure that we are correct. But in the sangha other people may tell us we're wrong. Even if you are a member of the sangha you might say: "I see that this is correct, so I'll just do it. I have looked deeply, what I am doing is correct. I am being true to myself, I don't care if members of the Sangha think I should not behave in such a way. Even if the sangha says that I should not do something, I do as I like." In that case you do not believe in the insight of the Sangha.

In the past the Buddha also took refuge in the sangha and the sangha eyes. The sangha eyes have decided many precepts for the sangha. So the Buddha Gautama also took refuge in the sangha, who are we to say: "I only do what I believe is correct?" In that case we do not really take the three jewels into our heart. In principle you have to request the sangha to help you to see your shortcomings. But if the Sangha tells us: "No, don't do it like that" and we say: "No, I don't care, what I see is very important and correct" then what is the use to be with the Sangha? Maybe you say: "This sangha is stupid, I'm leaving." So, you can leave. But when you leave you will see your shortcomings become stronger every day, and one day you become a monster without knowing it. And you may still be wearing the monk's robe. It's happened to many monks and nuns who live alone. They still wear the robe but they are not real monks. It is the wisdom of the Buddha, that in his time no monk stayed alone. Even in a new small practice centre we must have a Sangha. In the time of the Buddha it was always like that. There was never a monk who owned a big temple and lived alone.

The Buddha said that even if you come to place where all the physical conditions are good but the practice is not very good, you have to leave. In the place where there are a lot of good methods to transform your bad habit energy, but where there is not enough food for you to eat, not enough room for you, you have to stay in a tent in the cold winter, in that case even though there are good methods you have to leave because you cannot practice when you live in the cold of winter. But if you come to the place where there is enough housing and food, enough teaching and good methods, even if they chase you away you have to try your best to stick to them. That is what the Buddha taught to many monks in his time. When you have physical conditions that are good enough and you also have very good methods, you must have enough wisdom to go ahead in this practice environment in order to transform yourself. If you have appropriate conditions like that and if you don't go ahead it's a pity, a waste.

What does practice mean? Practice means trying to destroy the frontier between yourself and others; the person nearby, the person far away, and living beings around you. Among your habit energies may be the habit energy of not being able to communicate with people around you in the same sangha. You have to look deeply into yourself in order to see why. And when you see that frontier exists you have to dismantle it in order to be one with persons in the same sangha as you, and to get roots in everyone in the sangha, and to allow other people in the sangha to get roots in you. If you are such a person I am sure that you will be happy and when you are happy you will never want to leave the sangha. If you want to leave the sangha it means you have not rooted yourself in people and have not let people root themselves in you. You feel lonely, cut off, in a shell, you feel nobody understands you, and so you have to leave. If you are not successful in dismantling the frontier between you and others, if you are not happy with other members of the sangha, how can you go out and help others?

You can give a wonderful Dharma talk, repeating what I have said. But people very soon notice that you are just repeating words from other people. They will discover many of your shortcomings. If they see like that, they just buy the tape of Thay and they don't need to come to you. So we have to learn to destroy the frontier between ourselves and others and to feel one with the good as well as the less good and to help transform skilfully, lovingly. But if you are still in a shell and you feel that nobody in this sangha understands you, and you think you have learned enough already so now you can go out and set up a practice centre where you will be the boss, then you will see, people will discover very soon.

So we have to take refuge in the sangha. It’s how you can see. Everyone in the sangha gives you a lot of happiness and you give everyone in the sangha a lot of happiness naturally, like you eat and drink, without effort. If there’s no effort it’s because you have succeeded in dismantling the frontier between you and them. If you're still jealous and still feel hurt by others then we still have the frontier. Having the frontier we feel hurt, not having the frontier we are not hurt.

Even if you can recite many sutras by heart, it won't help. People can buy many books, they can even buy the one hundred books of the Tripitaka to read, so they don't need you. They only need your transformation, they only need that source of joy and peace radiating from you. You live happily with yourself, happily with people around you. So the practice is to try to dismantle the frontier, dismantle our shell, in order to take root in other members of the sangha, and let other members of the sangha take root in us.

When you see a banana tree you see it has three or four big leaves, very fresh, very green extending to the sky. These banana leaves absorb the sunshine and carbon dioxide to make sap which nurtures the whole banana tree. One big fresh leaf nurtures many young leaves which are still rolled up like a cylinder inside the banana tree. The big leaves are nurturing the young leaves. So you who have practised four, five or six years in Plum Village you are like the big leaf who is nurturing the young leaves, your young brothers and sisters in the Sangha who are just newly ordained. So you are no longer one drop of water, you are already the stream of water, and all together you will go to the ocean. And you must be in harmony with everyone.

In the body there are billions of cells. If you look deeply into each cell in your body there is no cell who is the boss, including the neurones in your brain, no one is the boss. Every cell stays in their own position and fulfils their own duty, and thanks to every cell playing their own role, taking their own responsibility to be in harmony, the body is happy. But if there is one cell who decides not to be like the others, one cell who decides: "No, I will not divide exactly like this" or "I want to change my position", then the body gets a cancer, and people have to make surgery and take out this abnormal cell. So it’s the same for the sangha. If someone causes a lot of trouble in the sangha we have to make a surgery and invite that person to leave. So everybody tries to be in their own position and do their best in order to live in harmony with themselves and with people around.

You live as a sangha in harmony. For the sangha to be harmony there are many guidelines: the five trainings, the ten trainings of a novice, the 248 trainings of a monk. All these trainings are for the harmony of the sangha. If you are not in harmony with the sangha you could be a dangerous cell for the body and you can create a cancer in the body; harmony is the principle. Every member of the sangha has to practice according to the five guidelines, the ten guidelines, or the 248 guidelines in order to live in harmony with others.

We know we are one drop of water in the big current of the river so we can all go to the ocean together. Becoming a monk or nun is forgetting that you have a separate self. Even if we are not a monk or nun yet, we decide to devote our life to the practice and train ourselves to transform to live without a shell, to be one with the sangha, to be one with everyone around us. That is the teaching of the Diamond Sutra.